

2013 Advent Book



For me, one of the enduring and perplexing mysteries of the Season is that of Incarnation. With all of my years of study and reflection, I have yet to find one good reason why God would come to us in such a preposterous fashion. Was there no other way? Did it really require God wrapping himself in the garb of flesh to fully fathom the human condition? Evidently, yes. In the Mystery that is our God, Incarnation is central to redemption and it stands at the epicenter of the Advent story.

Incarnation, as with Advent, is a messy proposition. The journey of Advent reflects that. No respectable Advent journey would be authentic and complete without first considering the angst, the uncertainty, and the fearfulness of waiting and the messiness of humanity. Sadly, many of us choose to bypass the uncertainties and fears that are central to Advent and make a beeline to the certainty of Bethlehem. But to do so is to render injustice to the lessons of anticipation and struggle that God teaches us in those shadow moments of life.

This Advent book calls upon the power of the Lectionary to force us to consider the textual shadows and uncertainties that accompany this Holy Season. These texts force us, in the words from a movie of some years ago, to do business with the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly among us. Our Hope is realized, yes; but our Hope is always birthed in the language of struggle.

These reflections reflect the heart and soul of the University family. Deep gratitude is offered to my colleague, Dr. Sheri Adams, for accompanying me on this Advent journey yet one more year. In addition, my administrative assistant, Lisa Hollifield, continues to go above and beyond the call of duty in enabling this work to reach its completion. Elizabeth Maye, a School of Divinity student, provided invaluable editorial assistance. Likewise, the University staff and administration continue to offer their blessing and support to this endeavor. Were it not for each of these, this guide would not be possible.

Take the journey seriously. Wallow in every aspect of the Advent experience. Practice patience. Wrestle with the Mystery. But most of all, pass through the dark places to the moment of Light.



ADVENT AT GARDNER-WEBB 2013

Danny West
Executive Director, Doctor
of Ministry Program,
School of Divinity
Professor of Preaching and
Pastoral Studies



SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 1

Sharon Starr
Associate Professor
and Dean of the School
of Nursing

Jeremiah 33:14-16
Luke 21:25-36

During this season of Advent, we celebrate the coming of the Christ Child while waiting in hope and anticipation for His return. Jeremiah wrote of the hope of Christ's birth (first advent) and His return (second advent). Luke reminds us that He will come back and that as we anticipate His return, we must prepare.

My husband, Kevin, and I have two grown daughters. When they were young, we waited with much hope and anticipation for the day we could declare that potty training was over and diapers were not a regular item on the shopping list. Likewise, a few years ago, Kevin planted one of my favorite trees in our backyard. We waited with much hope and anticipation for the tree to grow and for the first magnolia blossoms to appear.

In each of these situations, while we hoped for and anticipated glorious events, we had to prepare by looking for signs and then taking specific actions. Wiggly legs meant we better get to a restroom quickly to avoid a mistake while droopy magnolia leaves meant we needed to add water or fertilizer so the tree could grow.

Many hope for and anticipate Christ's return by looking for signs such as those described by Luke in our scripture passage. While we are anxious for Christ's return, looking for these signs can't be our primary focus. Our lives should embrace the present while we wait. Every year I anticipate the beautiful blooms that come each spring to my magnolia tree. While these blooms are a highlight, the life I live between their appearances is what is important.

We spend most of our time waiting for something to happen. Life is a process where we live each day in hope and anticipation that at the right time Christ will return. We celebrate the first advent of His coming and live our lives preparing for His second advent. During this waiting time, Christ expects us to look for ways to honor Him. The world is full of those needing to hear about the grace and salvation of our Lord. We must be alert in order to recognize the needs of those around us and respond appropriately. We must use our time of hope and anticipation by living lives that honor Him.

Things were not looking so great.

Oh it's true; the Lord had truly blessed Israel, bringing it out of oppression, giving it land to occupy and blessing it in numerous ways. But because the nation had turned away from God, the good times were coming to an end. The prophet Isaiah said there would be bloody battles, suffering, and exile.

But he also prophesied of a Hope. This Hope did not lie in the hands of earthly kings or rulers or skilled commanders of mighty armies but in a Messiah that God would send to deliver His people.

As I turn on the news the morning of this writing in late September, things are not looking so great. Although we live in a great nation that God has truly blessed, things seem to be in somewhat of a mess.

The news said the government may shut down because congress could not agree on what services to offer or how to pay for them. Nor could it agree on whether or not the government should require all of its citizens to have health insurance. I'm sure they opened their session with a prayer, yet have passed laws which have been interpreted by the courts as preventing public prayer from being offered at high school football games.

We continue to respond to terrorist activities – the latest being a rampage in a mall in Kenya.

Teachers are taking advantage of some new training being offered. It's not training on how to more effectively teach math but rather on how to face a shooter in school.

Our leaders are talking to Iran's leaders and will hopefully come to some agreement so we won't attack each other with nuclear weapons.

I could go on but you get the picture. Things are really in a mess. And as you are reading this, I hope these situations are no longer in the news, but odds are there will be a whole new set of issues that we are dealing with.

I try to make it a point to pray for our leaders each and every day and I hope you will join me. They really do have a tough job. I pray that they will do what they do, not to seek personal acclaim, or pats on the back from their political party. Instead, I pray that in everything they do and in every decision they make, they will seek to please God.

While I will certainly continue to pray for our leaders, I know our ultimate hope is not placed in the hands of The President, Republicans, Democrats, Representatives, Senators, or Supreme Court Justices.

Our hope is in the One that God sent to live among us for a while who will return one day. His Son. Our Savior. Our Hope.



MONDAY,
DECEMBER 2

Scott White
Director of
Human Resources

Isaiah 2:1-5
Romans 15:7-13



**TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 3**

**Merianna Harrelson
School of Divinity Student**

**Isaiah 11:1-10
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13**

It is easy for us to look back at this passage in Isaiah and think immediately of the Messiah fulfilled in Jesus, especially during the time of Advent. While this is an interpretation option in light of reading this scripture in our current time and place, it is not the only option for interpretation.

Looking back in order to look forward is certainly a worthwhile practice for us as ministers and scholars of the Bible, but it can also lead us to glaze over the importance of this passage for the people it represents. In a time when the people of Yahweh were troubled by the impending threat of Babylon, these words indicate that God has a plan for God's people. The events they are enduring now are not haphazard, but a piece of the puzzle leading to a time when "the wolf shall lie down with the lamb;" a time of shalom, of peace. Not only do we hear the promise that God has a plan in Isaiah's words, but we also hear what the divine king of Judah would bring to this kingdom: divine wisdom and justice. In ruling with this divine wisdom and justice, then even nature and wild beasts will be at peace.

In the uncertainty of the changing world in which we live, this is a word of hope for us, too. Wouldn't we like a leader who rules with divine wisdom and justice? Wouldn't we like the promise of a time when the uncertainty of the wildness of creation will be brought to order and lie at peace with each other?

The peace Isaiah describes is what the author of 1 Thessalonians hopes will come for the community of Thessalonica as well: "And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you." The Thessalonians, as the people of Yahweh in Isaiah, are experiencing threats from outside sources as they struggled to create a community that followed Jesus and was centered around peace, hope and love.

In looking at these two communities of faith as they are trying to overcome the persecution around them, there is a message of hope and promise for us as well. As students and faculty members who are trying to live out a call to ministry, we can rest assured that God has a plan for God's people. No matter what we encounter, we can choose to share love, joy, and peace even with those communities and people we encounter on our journey to answer this call to ministry, and in the process we might just be proclaiming the Messiah.

I love doing yard work. Mowing the lawn has never really seemed like a chore to me. In fact, where some folks dream of someday owning a BMW, I dream of owning a John Deere; but my Craftsman keeps on chugging along ... (insert *not coveting* devotion here). By now, I think I'm pretty good at knowing how and when to add "help" to the lawn. You're reading this on December 4, but I'm writing this at the end of September when it's a great time to plant grass – reseeding and/or filling in bare spots. Did you know that your soil has a pH factor and that if it's not correct, all that fertilizer you spread all over the lawn can pass right through and not give you the results you were wanting? To help resolve this issue, I go out to the County Co-op, get a couple of their boxes and instructions, dig up some dirt from various places in the yard to put in those boxes, and mail it to the NC Department of Agriculture who then tests it for me. Afterwards, they send me a report letting me know if my soil is pH balanced or not and exactly how many pounds of lime per 1000 square feet I should add to help my yard reach its proper balance. Better yet, they also let me know what blend of fertilizer and how much of it I should add. I could ask a local lawn and garden professional his or her opinion about the amounts, but this test keeps me from trying to guess. Of course, then comes the fun part of aerating and prepping the ground to plant the grass seeds. All this preparation helps my grass to grow greener and richer.

How often are we willing to let the Lord dig into our hearts, test us, give us a report on our anxious thoughts, find the weeds in our offensive ways, and prepare us fully for the way everlasting (Ps. 139:23-24)? As we begin this Advent season, do we really want to grow spiritually? Sometimes we're content with where we are, and we let spiritual truth and growth pass right by us. There's usually a cost of some sort that comes with growth (as with my yard). Since I've communicated with a source who now knows my soil better than I do, I can easily have a hope that next spring my yard should look and grow better. No guessing, no Googling, not even asking an expert what's the normal course of action for these parts. My soil's been tested. And I can either be open to the prescription to help it or not. Now, what about testing my heart?

Lord, though it may cost, help me accept what You reveal about my heart, and let this Advent season give me hope that You will show me the way to grow in Your wisdom and love.



WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 4

Paul Etter
Director of Choral
Activities/Coordinator
of Sacred Music, Choirs,
Handbells

Isaiah 35:1-10
Matthew 3:1-12



THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 5

Sarah Currie
Director of Retention

Psalm 146:5-10
James 5:7-10

I am not a naturally patient person. Just recently I visited the North Carolina DMV website and received a copy of my driving record. And to be honest, even I was a little surprised by what I found. I had received 8 speeding tickets over the course of the last 10 years. I tend to be impatient, trying to get to places as quickly as possible. I want processes to be expedited and want challenges or answers in my personal life to be resolved in a timely manner. So when I read the beginning of James 5: 7-10, which opens with the words, "Be patient," I began to get nervous. Yet as I explored it more, it revealed great reward in the process of patience. The passage continues on, "then brothers, until the Lord's coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged, the Judge is standing at the door! Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord." So let's explore... in Greek the word for *patient* means "to remain behind, endure, or steadfastness," and in this short passage, it is used four times communicating the importance of the word and message. "Then brothers, until the Lord's coming," casts the eternal perspective, the key to true patience.

The author uses the farming illustration to demonstrate the process of patience in our lives. In the waiting, there is a process for the farmer: It begins with crop selection, soil preparation, planting, irrigation, and finally ends with harvesting the crop. And not just any crop; it is described as a valuable crop. Knowing that the crop is valuable should help us all endure. I find the phrase, "how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains," interesting because the "how" speaks to the manner of the farmer. What is reflected in my manner or demeanor over situations, suffering and disappointments I go through? Overall I think the passage calls me to be patient in the processes of my life, to demonstrate a manner worthy of Christ's call on my life, and to find the ability to move forward by maintaining an eternal perspective. The Christmas season is a vivid reminder to me to have an eternal perspective; Christ came so that I may have eternal life. He lived His life in a manner worthy of emulating. In what processes of life is God calling you to be patient? How would your "manner" be described? Do you find it easy or hard to maintain an eternal perspective in your life? And why?

I was a Momma's boy growing up in Baltimore with my younger sister, Tracy, and older brother, David. Christmas was a big deal at our house; our mother made sure of it. She would decorate the house inside and out and start talking it up shortly after Thanksgiving. We didn't grow up in the church but we all had friends we would go with from time to time. As a child I knew the Christmas story. I also knew of the stories of Jesus' healings and the work of John to ready the way for him. My mother would talk about the Bible stories some around the holidays but not as the main focus. I see now, at age 48, the work she did helping and giving to others throughout her life was the lesson she was teaching. Each Christmas, our mother would shop for all the cousins in North Carolina and Maryland, making sure no one was overlooked. Every kid on the street would get a Christmas book of lifesavers (If you're old enough you remember them). She would spend hours looking at the Montgomery Ward catalog with my sister and me and all we had circled for Santa. The joy on my mother's face from helping someone or seeing them open a gift is unforgettable.

I don't remember my mother or father ever reading the Bible but I know they had the spirit of Christ in them by their actions. Our father worked hard as a welder in a steel mill and was gone a lot. I resented him for years for not being there as much as I thought he should have been. I know now he loved and cared for all of us and just wanted more for us than he had growing up on a cotton farm in Ellenboro N.C. My father taught us how to work hard but our mother taught us how to care about our work.

Our mom and dad have passed on, as we all must do to be with the Lord. Though I didn't grow up in the church I learned Faith, Hope and Love for others from my mom—The Faith she had in us, the Hope for our futures and Love she always shared with us.

Now on my Christian walk I look back at the things my mother did for others and the things she taught us and see they are no different than the things Jesus proclaimed. She didn't teach us this with a Bible but with her actions, just as Jesus did. Also as John readied the way for Jesus, my mother readied us for our way in life and our Christian life.

I would not be the hard worker I think I am without my father. But I would never be the man I know I am without the lessons my mother taught me. Stop and think for a moment at what a wonderful place this would be if we all tried to do what Jesus proclaimed in Matthew 11:2-11. Or at the very least if we could all try to live as my mother. That is a pretty good job for a lady I never saw read a Bible. Thanks, Mom!



**FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 6**

**Rick Hollifield
Director of Construction
and Engineering**

**Amos 2:6-16
Matthew 11:2-11**



SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 7

Jefferson Waugh
School of Divinity Student

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
Matthew 1:18-25

Advent is frequently portrayed as a joyful and anticipatory time in which Christians anxiously await the arrival of the Messiah. But for many, painful memories of the past, fear-evoking circumstances of the present, and the uncertainty of the future overshadow the joy and excitement of the season. Some may be spending this season without loved ones for the first time; others may constantly have health concerns bearing down on their minds; and still others may be unsure of how they are going to buy their children a Christmas gift while continuing to be able to put food on the table. We are all gripped by fear and uncertainty at times throughout our lives, causing us to miss the joy and excitement of life.

Likewise, the words of Scripture in Psalm 80 and Matthew 1 show us that both the people of Israel, and Joseph—the new father-to-be—were also crippled by a sense of fear and uncertainty as they came face to face with seemingly unbearable circumstances. For the Israelites, it was memories of past oppression, combined with the unknown of what was still to come for them as a people and nation that overwhelmed them with fear. On the other hand, Joseph's fear stemmed out of what those within his own community would think upon hearing that Mary was pregnant and unmarried.

But, at the height of Joseph's fear, God stepped in and provided assurance and direction in Joseph's time of need. Surely, many of his fears subsided as the angel of the Lord came to Joseph in a dream and gave him the good news that Mary, his future wife, was carrying the long-awaited Messiah! In the face of his circumstances, Joseph found that he was not alone. Rather, he had the hand of God right beside him, guiding and directing him and Mary throughout the pregnancy and birth of Jesus Christ. No longer could Joseph be gripped with fear, because he now had the assurance of the Lord to carry with him along the journey.

Throughout this season, as life gets tough, and fears start to creep into our minds, we must remember the assurance given by God that the future holds greater things than we could ever imagine. We have been redeemed because of the birth of the Messiah, who we celebrate this season. Through His life, death, and resurrection, God has provided us with the assurance that, no matter what life throws our way, we can overcome it by relying on the strength of the Lord. That is great news!

Look! I'm sending my messenger on ahead to clear the way for me. Suddenly, out of the blue, the Leader you've been looking for will enter his Temple—yes, the Messenger of the Covenant, the one you've been waiting for. "Look! He's on his way!" A message from the mouth of GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies. (Malachi 3:1 The Message)

We've been waiting for days now—anticipating this arrival of a Baby. We wait with expectancy for hope made real, but if we can bear a moment of honesty, are we really expecting that it is God who is coming?

And if we are, in fact, expecting that it is God, are we paying attention? Or have we become so tangled up in decking the halls that we have forgotten to make ready the manger?

Because when God comes, things change. Life is no longer what we make of it, but we find that there is this rhythm, the rhythm of grace, the beat of hope, the oceans of mercy that we often stumble in to. And it leaves us drenched.

During this Advent season, as we pause for this Baby, this hope, this joy, this love, this peace to come, may we also prepare ourselves for the One who is, in fact, God.

But who will be able to stand up to that coming? Who can survive his appearance? He'll be like white-hot fire from the smelter's furnace. He'll be like the strongest lye soap at the laundry. He'll take his place as a refiner of silver, as a cleanser of dirty clothes. He'll scrub the Levite priests clean, refine them like gold and silver, until they're fit for God, fit to present offerings of righteousness. Then, and only then, will Judah and Jerusalem be fit and pleasing to God, as they used to be in the years long ago. (Malachi 3:2-6, The Message)

As we wait for God, may we not forget that sometimes we are waiting for the whisper, and sometimes, we are waiting for Him to turn over tables. Let us not fail to miss the thunder in the desert (Luke 3:6) because we are so caught up in trying to find God under the brightly lit tree.

God has come and He is coming. And as long as God is, there is still hope.



SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 8

Elizabeth Maye
School of Divinity Student

Malachi 3:1-4
Luke 3:1-6



MONDAY,
DECEMBER 9

Steve Harmon
Adjunct Professor of
Christian Theology

Nahum 1:15
James 3:18

On his very first Christmas, we began reading with our son *Can You Say Peace?* by Karen Katz. Besides demonstrating the wonderfully varied ways children around the world say “peace” in their own languages, the book declares that “all around the world today, children will wish for peace, hope for peace, and ask for peace.” The children—and adults—of the world share a hope for peace because all people are created in the image of the God whose hope for the world is peace. We also share a hope for peace because the world currently lacks the peace for which God created the world and toward which God is moving the world.

It's appropriate that the first week of Advent's focus on hope is followed by the second week's focus on peace, for “peace” sums up in a word the biblical vision of the world for which God and people hope. Today's text from Nahum is a call to envision this future peace: “Look! On the mountains the feet of one who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace!” (1:15). The whole book of Nahum is a contrast of two stories with different end-pictures: the story of violence that underwrites the present evil order of things, epitomized by Nineveh, city of the violent Assyrian empire, which ends in “devastation, destruction, and desolation” (2:10), and the radically other story of God's goal of peace for all creation, epitomized by Jerusalem, city of those who seek the peace of God's reign. Today's text from James makes the same contrast, for the antidote to the diabolical

wisdom of the world that leads to conflict is the heavenly wisdom that leads to “a harvest of righteousness...sown in peace by those who make peace” (3:18).

As we join God in wishing, hoping, and asking for peace this Advent, let us also join God in working for the peace for which we hope. Such pictures of the end, suggested the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, are “enough to make me change my whole life” (*Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett [University of California Press, 1967], p. 57). Nahum tells us how to change our lives in light of this end: “Celebrate your festivals”—in other words, worship and in so doing be transformed by and become participants in the story of the peace of God's reign, and “fulfill your vows”—in other words, live out the practice of peacemaking mentioned by James that we take on in our covenantal vows to live as the people of God, joining God in what God is doing to move the world toward its end of peace.

We won't have to look very hard to find where God is working for peace. Wherever there is war, violence, division, and interpersonal conflict—in short, wherever there is broken relationship—God is already at work to realize the divine hope of peaceful community. Let us be open to opportunities to join in during this Advent season.

One year ago, I fell into a hole and broke my foot. One year ago, I was falling into a routine of expectation and performance. I had just graduated from Divinity School; I was working two jobs and serving as a minister in my church. My work was extremely busy and it was not unusual for me to work well past 8:00 p.m. most nights. I felt as though I had no time for my husband, for me, and my relationship with God. I did not have a peace, a sense of well-being that I was okay or right with God. I was depending upon my own strength, my own knowledge.

Like the people of God in the Exile, I fell prey to that false sense of confidence which so easily besets those whose lives have been attended by health and prosperity. I thought I was secure. God's faithfulness came in judgment, and brokenness shattered the illusion of those who were sent into Exile, stripping them of all that was familiar including their King, home, and God. However, God did not forsake them, and God was not the one who abandoned me. I knew that if I was going to proclaim my relationship with God a living one, I could not go on living as before. I had to trust this God who gives life, the one who not only keeps me physically but spiritually renewed. He alone is sufficient and able to proclaim healing.

I believe the Exiles' experience sheds a new light on the meaning of peace, one that I ultimately see displayed in the character of God. If I dare enter into the sanctuary and bring a sacrifice of praise to God, I need to first bring a sacrifice of myself, and let God's character be born and witnessed in my life.

The story of the Exile teaches me that this journey of peace is a shared experience. I had to learn how to be corrected and cared for in the midst of community. This came as a hard lesson that God first showed me through the generosity of my husband, and later, my team at work. I had to learn how to let go of pride and let friends carry me at times, drive me a lot of times, and tell me to put my foot up all the time. Just as they did, God said, "Come to me my daughter. Let me heal some of your broken places that you have not given time for restoration. Let me show you a better way, an easier way. Stop spinning your wheels, and let me be in charge."

This Advent, I thank God for the gift he shared with the people of the Exile – an everlasting and unchanged covenant. I have peace anew, for out of correction has come blessing, and out of brokenness, restoration.



**TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 10**

**Katie Lovelace
Associate Director for
Creative Services
School of Divinity Alumna**

**Ezekiel 37:26-27
Galatians 5:22-23**



**WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 11**

**Justin Webb
Lecturer, Department
of Religious Studies**

**Isaiah 55:12-13
Romans 8:1-6**

I have always been a bit of a homebody. Whether or not I will admit it publicly, I have always believed, at least on a subconscious level, that Cleveland County was the greatest place in the world. I love my home. What often eases my mind and brings solace into my heart at hectic times, are walks through the woods down to the creek at my house or simply sitting a spell in the rocking chair on my front porch. As I prepared to write this, I stood on my porch and the aesthetically pleasing sight which greeted me was a panoramic view of trees surrounding a freshly bush hogged field under a blue sky. I thought to myself, "Wow. Life is perfect."

In Isaiah 55:12-13, we hear the prophet's encouragement to an exiled people. It is a message of hope to return to a beautiful homeland! There will be joy and peace, and creation itself will burst into song, with lush trees sprouting up in place of thorns. Perhaps some of the hearers of Isaiah's message did indeed return to their ancestral homeland. Perhaps it was beautiful and perfect.

Realistically though, if it were perfect, it probably did not stay that way. After taking a second look around, I realized all the tasks I need to accomplish. I will need to put out fertilizer when spring comes, and the porch already needs to be pressure-washed again. Spring may be a good time to put out more mulch too, and I really should go ahead and change the oil in the tractor now. As a matter of fact, it seems as if the forces of nature are always trying to tear down the house I built with the sweat of my brow. Maybe life is not so perfect after all.

For many years the church has lived in an intermission. Christ came and dwelt with us. We have seen the beauty and perfection that he brought. Yet, life is still imperfect and we long for the Parousia. We long for the perfect home we will have with him where wearisome maintenance is not required.

In Romans 8, Paul expounds on how the Spirit fits into the framework of his gospel. In Romans 8:2, he tells us that, "*the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death.*" As believers, we live by the Spirit. The Spirit testifies to the beautiful and perfect reality that we belong to Christ at the present. However, the Spirit also works continually with and in us, changing what is still imperfect.

This Advent season, will we let the Spirit show us the perfect Christ child and thus bring us peace where there is all too often only fret and toil? Will we let the Spirit transform the imperfect and thus prepare us for our eternal perfect home where we will dwell with the Lord?

As we filed into the old, squeaky wooden chairs in the choir loft on Christmas Eve, adorned in our most festive Christmas outfits but unified by robes, we marveled at the tranquility of the sanctuary at night. Last year, I was new to my church. However, I had heard that the Christmas Eve Lovefeast service is the most anticipated service of the year. I observed with wonder as families and friends sat a little closer on the pews, newcomers were embraced, and drifting members returned home. But although we had all gathered together in that sacred community to experience harmony, express forgiveness and soak in goodwill, I sensed the looming heaviness that tends to creep its way into the cold Christmas season.

One church member, whose name might as well have been Sorrow, was suffocating under the weight of her father's impending death. A mother, who could have been named Desperation, wiped away tears from her tired, droopy eyes. She was carrying the burden of her children who would not be receiving their favorite gifts in the morning. Each of us had wandered into that service with a name by which we had summarized our identity. I saw a man named Worthless, a teenager named Ugly, and a child named Poverty. I reflected upon the numerous names I had

given myself over the years. As a child, I suffered with many health conditions and had named myself Sickness. In my teenage years, my family fell apart and I called myself Abandoned. At other stages in my life, I had named myself Ignorance, Anxiety, and Unlovable.

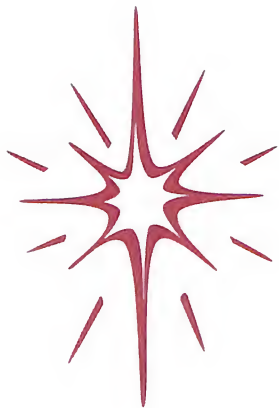
However, as I sat in the stillness of the Christmas Lovefeast service, I realized that at some point over the last few years, my names had been dramatically transformed. Sickness had been rehabilitated into Health. Anxiety had been conquered by Security. Abandonment had been swallowed up by Adoption. Furthermore, I recognized that I was no longer in charge of appointing my name. Just as the Lord promised to rebuild Jerusalem and assign her a name of joy, I too had been restored and renamed. As I looked around the sanctuary and saw Sorrow, Desperation, Worthless, Ugly and Poverty, I held my candle high above my head and proclaimed to the darkness that hope abounds through Christ's redemptive work. My heart was overcome with excitement as we watched together with expectant hope for the transformative power of the memory of Christ's birth.



THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 12

Jackie Seter
School of Divinity Student

Jeremiah 33:6-9
Hebrews 12:14



FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 13

Pat Litton
Gardner-Webb University
MBA 1998

Isaiah 26:12-13
1 Peter 3:8-12

Isaiah 26: 12-13 ¹² LORD, you establish peace for us; all that we have accomplished you have done for us.

1 Peter 3: 8-12 ⁸ Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. ⁹ Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

We live in a fast paced world and a time of increasing personal disconnect in our communities. Many have come to rely on cyber communication for community bonding instead of gatherings and porch sittings. Today's society seems more focused on the "me" factor and less on the "we" factor. 1 Peter reminds us that we should love one another and be compassionate and humble. But, in the secular world these qualities are often viewed as weaknesses. We hear the commonly stated phrases, "take care of yourself first" and "humility will get you nowhere." However, the qualities described by Peter are identified with Christian maturity. In many situations it is far easier to repay evil with evil, but it takes Christian maturity to repay evil with a blessing. Peter points us down the path of placing others first, which stands in contrast to the world's views.

I often think of people that have shaped my character: church workers, teachers, coaches and my parents. All of these had positive impacts on my character and spiritual growth. They taught me how to love one another by showing compassion. I'm sometimes reminded that compassion is not one of my strengths. But, I feel that compassion is a part of the Christian faith. The Bible tells us out of faith, hope and love that love is the greatest of these. So I ask the question, "Can one truly love another without compassion?" We can nurture our compassion for others by growing spiritually in Christ. As a people of God we should be thankful that God set the tone for how we should treat others. I'm always thankful to God and to others who have shown me compassion and the Way.

God has established peace for us and we are reminded that all we have is accomplished through God. Many in the secular world think they have all the answers. However, as Christians, we know that God is in control and that he is Lord of all. We are fortunate to have religious freedoms so we can honor His name alone. As we enter the Advent season may we as a people thank God that He had the compassion to send His son to die for us so that we can experience everlasting life.

What a blessing peace is. When stillness and comfort calm our hearts and minds, then rest is engendered. In Psalm 30, we can see the beauty of the extremes life offers us. The author is at a moment of praise, then at a moment of questioning, uttering deliverance from the grave—then, in the next breath, he questions if the Lord will lead him to destruction. Yes, of course, life is full of such extremes. One moment we are praising an almighty God, the next we are questioning God's wisdom. How dare we assume ourselves to be so wise when we view life in such extremity? Is God influenced by extremity? John's gospel combats this imbalance of life with one promise: *"My Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with each of them (v.23)."* What a beautiful promise that the Lord will administer peace from extremes by making a home among us, offering balance and rest?

Last Christmas, I experienced beautiful peace while celebrating with my grandmother. At that point, she had already been diagnosed with cancer, and I knew seeing December 2013 with her still in my presence was a longshot. We gathered together, my Papa, Mama, and I, to ring in the festivities. We joined in tree decoration, Jimmy Stewart movies, and popcorn and chocolate through the entire month of December. That Christmas season I continued a habit that I began when I was a small child: kneeling in front of my Mama's chair and resting my head in her lap as we spoke about the Lord and other beautiful things in

life. It is where I found peace: a tangible, physical place that was promised to me and for me. My Mama did her best at sharing life with me, and in her lap I felt at home. She provided a listening ear and a correcting spirit when I needed both. Yet the extremes of life were forced upon me by cruel reality; what had provided such peace was removed from me by March.

I am so glad that, in Jesus, there are no extremes; he is constant, desiring to provide a home for us. The peace I felt in my Mama's lap was not one of a physical body or a gentle touch. The source of the peace I felt was the person of whom we spoke. It was a promise that Jesus gave in John's gospel that he will "bring the gift of peace of mind." Jesus made a *home*, a resting place among us. What a beautiful promise that, when extremes in life force themselves on us, he takes the time to sit down and lets us lay our heads on his lap. He gave us time, and he continues to do so. In this Christmas season, take time to rest on his lap, and allow him to provide a listening ear and correcting spirit when needed, and to find your resting place in him.



**SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 14**

**Elisabeth Edmonson
Visit Coordinator for
Undergraduate Admissions**

**Psalm 30
John 14:23-27**



SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 15

Anna Hamrick
Assistant Professor of
Nursing and Director, FNP
Program

Zephaniah 3:14-20
Luke 3:7-18

One December afternoon I sat at the desk reviewing a patient's chart. The sound of Christmas music drifted down the hospital hallway. Nurses were dressed in festive scrubs. Fragrant wreaths with bright colored bows hung over the visitor's entrance. Christmas was in the air.

Quietly the physician sitting beside me said "America should schedule two Christmases per year." Knowing this provider was not a Christian, I asked the question that he begged. "Why?" His rationale was "Everyone is so much more joyful and it's a great boost for the economy."

His perception of an American Christmas as economic stimulus and antidepressant still bothers me.

....Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away your punishment, he has turned back your enemy. The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm. Zephaniah 3:14-15

On this third Sunday of Advent we light the candle representing Joy. To rejoice (verb) is to express joy (noun). The joy that we have from our relationship with God is not circumstantial. Our ability to rejoice with all our heart is founded in the promise that God is with us at all times and in all circumstances.

This Advent Guide leads us on a journey celebrating the first coming of Christ. Perhaps we shouldn't put it away with the decorations at the end of the month. What if we pulled it back out in June and let it reignite our joy. Better yet, what if we got out our ultimate guide, the Holy Bible, monthly, weekly, or even daily to remind us of our reason to rejoice.

As we journey through our circumstances and anticipate the second coming of Christ, I challenge you to rejoice. May others recognize the joy of Christmas in you all year round.

Rejoice always. 1 Thessalonians 5:16

Have you ever considered what brings you the greatest joy? For me, it is my family and the many occasions we have been able to celebrate life together. If I were to list the events that have brought me the most happiness the first would be, of course, marrying my high school sweetheart on November 25, 1979. To be loved, appreciated and cared for has brought me much joy for the past 34 years. Eric and I could not help but rejoice when our first son was born in December of 1985. Instantly, our lives changed and a new type of love entered our hearts. For the first time, I experienced a love I really didn't know was within me. We rejoiced and praised God for this beautiful miracle and blessing. Then came the birth of our second son in April of 1989. How could I possibly love another child as much as the first? I soon realized that God allows our love to expand in a way that doesn't seem possible. To witness our sons grow up as best friends and remain that way even to this day is another reason for rejoicing. Many blessings have followed, such as, 34 years of ministry together, going on mission trips as a family, our sons' graduations and their weddings. We were blessed to see our prayers answered as God sent Christian women into our sons' lives.

My most joy-filled moments come when I reflect on all the wonderful times we have spent together on family vacations. Honestly, we are "Disney Nuts!" With over 20 trips to Disney World over the years,

our family experienced one of the most joyful "Disney moments" ever... we were chosen to be Grand Marshals for the Magic Kingdom parade on June 16th, 2012. Our joy could not be contained! Our smiles, laughter and waving continued that day until we hurt... no, really we hurt! Yet, we kept saying "This is the best day ever!"

What has been the "best day" for you? You have read a few joys in my life but none would have ever taken place without the presence of the Lord in me. At the age of nine, I accepted Jesus into my heart and have no doubt that He has been with me every step of the way. Because of Christ, I can rejoice in the good times and I can rejoice through the hard times. Because of Him, I have found the joy that only He can give... in every circumstance of life. God's Word reminds us to be anxious for nothing... instead we are to give all things over to Him. Our Lord will be faithful to walk before us, beside us, to carry us when needed, and to run the "race" with us all the way to the finish line. At this time of the year we are reminded that the greatest joy for all of humankind all began in a manger when Jesus Christ was born!



MONDAY,
DECEMBER 16

Teresa Davis
Administrative Assistant
to the Office of Christian
Life and Service

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Philippians 4:4-7



**TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 17**

**Wade Roof
Pastor, Resurrection
Lutheran Church
in Cameron, SC
Doctor of Ministry Student**

**Exodus 15:20-21
Luke 5:33-39**

Waiting can be so difficult, especially when you're hungry! I officiated a wedding not too long ago, and because of some unavoidable events early in the day, the wedding had been postponed a few hours. Meanwhile, guests waited, the bridal party waited, and I waited until all the issues had been resolved. Needless to say, because of the all the waiting, we all were very hungry. At the close of the ceremony, the guests all rushed out toward the reception ready to finally get something in their aching stomachs. I myself quickly took a few pictures with the happy couple then moved toward the buffet line as fast as I could. Yet when I arrived at the reception, the wedding planner had blocked off the entrance and held the guests waiting for the bride and groom to get there. An hour after they arrived, many guests had gone, and those of us who were left had little energy to party; that is until we had our fill of the wedding feast that waited on the other side of that door for us. Then, and only then, were we able to celebrate with the happy couple.

In this wonderful season of Advent, I am reminded of this wedding, and reminded of the waiting we are asked to do for the bridegroom, Jesus. We long for His return, and wait expectantly for His coming, yet we know not what time He will show. It is with aching stomachs that we long for the feast, it is with impatient grumbling that we look for signs of His return, and it is with longing hearts that we pray for His presence among us, yet we wait and we watch and we wait some more.

Even though Advent is all about our expectant waiting and watching for our Savior's return, it is also about acknowledging God's presence with us now, and celebrating how God is preparing us, the Church, to meet our bridegroom at the altar. This Advent season is about preparing our hearts, minds, and bodies for Christ's Christmas coming through participating in all the ways and places that God is revealing Christ to us on earth. It is about seeing the Emanuel, joining into the "God with us," and experiencing the wedding feast even before the bridegroom arrives.

Through bread and wine, God gives us a foretaste of the feast to come in the Holy Eucharist: a quick taste of the coming Kingdom. And through this experience, we no longer wait with aching stomachs and heavy hearts, but as a people ready to party and celebrate at the biggest wedding reception this world has ever seen.

I look forward to the Christmas coming of Christ, yet I know that even though we have to wait, God has made sure that no one will go hungry. May your Advent waiting be filled with foretastes of what we all will be celebrating at the end of time, the bridegroom, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord – who is definitely worth the wait!

A year ago, Kristen Setzer was asked to write on these very same passages. As her words echo in my mind, my heart aches and hopes, for I find myself in a similar place: desiring to have another child, but faced with the frustration and disappointment that comes with struggling to conceive. I don't claim to speak on behalf of those who struggle with infertility, but I do feel called to share my story and what the Lord is teaching me.

I am a planner by nature, and I like to be in control. My plan was to get married, finish graduate school and start a family. But when we were finally ready, that didn't happen as easily as I thought. We were blessed to conceive Liam on the first round of medication and he is the joy of our lives. But as we approach completing three rounds of medication and nearly a year of trying, I am faced with the knowledge that it is His plan, His will be done; not mine.

Deciding to be a Christ follower means relinquishing control in all things, not just the ones I'm willing to let God handle. But it's more than just giving up control, it's submitting. The hope that comes with following His plan doesn't mean that I'll get my way, my plan. It means submitting that He knows best, that He has a better plan for my life than I could ever fathom. It means choosing to submit even when I feel like I'm in "captivity."

It is in this time of "captivity" that He beckons us to call upon Him, to seek and find Him. Of course He knows my heart's desire, but He also calls us to bring these requests to Him in prayer. Do I believe that simply doing this will result in a positive pregnancy test? No. But I do believe that he will deliver me; restore me.

When Jeremiah writes to the captive Israelites about restoration, they are convinced that the plan of restoration meant returning to the Promised Land. But ultimately, God had a greater plan. Restoration was not limited to a people group returning to their homeland. Restoration was God's plan for His people to be reconciled to Him, through His Son, Christ Jesus.

As we prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth and beginning of restoration, I Thessalonians 5:16-18 call us to, "Rejoice always. Pray continuously. Give thanks in all circumstances." And so, part of my response to His plan—whatever that may be, is to give thanks for the beautiful boy who delights in Thomas the Train and exudes joy wherever he goes. To give thanks and rejoice with friends who are expecting. To pray continuously and seek the Lord with all my heart even when I don't know the outcome. And when I call upon Him, He will listen and hear me, and I will be found in Him. My prayer is that you may do the same this Advent season.



WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 18

Emily Robertson
Educational Technology
Coordinator

Jeremiah 29:11-14
I Thessalonians 5:16



THURSDAY,
DECEMBER 19

Titi Adewale
Assistant Director of
International Programs

Psalm 46
1 Peter 1:3-9

As I read these passages, I was reminded of two attributes of God – His mercy and His sovereignty. I pictured the Psalmist saying God is our refuge and fortress, our strength and confidence in the time of storm. Storms of life can be traumatic and catastrophic but God's abiding presence is there to comfort us in our states of despair and confusion. *"... though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof"* (Psalm 46: 2 & 3), yet, we will not fear. Rather, our confidence will be in the Lord who made the heavens and earth because His presence is with us.

One of the names of God is *Jehovah Shammah*, meaning *the Lord is there* (Ezekiel 48:35). God is always there, He has promised never to leave nor forsake us no matter what. His presence brings comfort; He is our hiding place and shelter in the time of storm. Storms of life may come in different ways, such as sickness, death, loss of employment, loneliness, depression, failure, a prodigal child and the list goes on. But right in the midst of the storm, there we will find God.

The presence of *Jehovah Shammah* gives us peace that passes all understanding. No wonder Psalm 46:10 commands: *"Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth."* In our storms God wants us to trust that He will see us through and in the end He will be

glorified. The storms may leave us weakened, battered and hopeless; thinking we cannot go on but at such times let us be reminded that *"We are kept by the power of God through faith ..."* (1 Peter 1:5). The power of God carries us in our afflictions and trials – in the storms of life.

What is the purpose of the storms of life? *"That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perishes, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honor and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ"* (1 Peter 1:7). In the midst of the storms, God is breaking, melting and remolding us into His image so that we can be more like Him. The crucible of affliction is for purification and no doubt the process is painful but the final product will be priceless.

As we approach this Advent season, let us thank God, for He is at work in our lives. Let us praise Him for His abiding presence that anchors our souls in the midst of the storms of life. And in faith, let us each declare *"It is well, it is well with my soul."* *Jehovah Shammah* is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

Maybe it is because I read a lot of civil rights' history or maybe it is because the leaders of the civil rights' movement used so much biblical imagery, but I thought immediately of the civil rights' movement as I read of the Lord cutting Rahab in pieces, piercing the dragon, drying up the sea, the great deep sea, and making a way for the redeemed to come singing.

Years ago, on one of the Civil Rights' Sites Trips that I took with students, we spent a night at the Highlander School in Tennessee. In the 1950's and 60's many of the civil rights' movement leaders were trained in non-violent resistance at the Highlander School. The musician of the movement at that time had retired but still lived on the property. Word was sent that we were there and hoped to meet him. He not only brought himself but his guitar as well, and we were treated to a long, wonderful concert of songs from the movement, with historical commentary. One thing he told us was that a decision was made early on that the civil rights' movement would be a singing movement. "When people sing together," he said, "they lose their fear."

He also described how he took songs that black people at the time knew well, either from church or popular culture, and adapted them with new words so that they spoke to the issues at hand. Several times he would say to the black students, "You know this one. You sang it at church." Several of the students were excellent musicians themselves, and as the old man would sing, they would provide "backup." Wow, what a treat! What a memory!!

One of the refrains of the civil rights' movement was, "God makes a way out of no way." I still occasionally hear one of my African American students use it to describe God making a way for him or her to come to school.

It is interesting that both of these passages call for the reader to wake up. Wake up and get wisdom. Wake up and get understanding. Wake up and see that God wants to make a way out of no way for us. As we sing together this Christmas, let's lose our fear. Let's let sorrow and sighing flee away and let's welcome joy and gladness.



FRIDAY,
DECEMBER 20

Sheri Adams
Professor of Theology
and Church History

Isaiah 51:9-11
Ephesians 5:14-17



SATURDAY,
DECEMBER 21

Douglas Goodwin
Graduate Student, School
of Divinity & Department
of Religious Studies

Psalms 149:1-9
Ephesians 5:18-19

What prevents us from expressing joy?

The most common answers probably include stress, work, and the busyness of life. There are so many things that seem to rob of us our joy. Oftentimes it seems that just when we are about to get ahead and able to enjoy life, something comes up to take it all away; devastating health news, loss of jobs, natural disasters, or even the loss of a loved one. There is no denying that there are forces at work that prevent us from having joy. Yet we strive so hard to obtain it. Nationally, we celebrate no less than 10 national holidays per year. Personally, we celebrate for a variety of reasons including birthdays, anniversaries, Valentines, Mother's and Father's Day, and the weekly celebration of Fridays!! Those of us who attend worship on Sundays are privileged with yet another opportunity to celebrate each week.

But despite all this celebration, we still have very little joy.

The Israelites knew what it meant to have Joy and they knew how to celebrate. Despite the difficulties they endured, the Psalms serve as an overflow of the joy that the Israelites were unable to keep contained. A brief survey of the Psalms reveals praises to God from the Israelites over things that seem mundane to

us. Yet their joy is unmistakable. They sang about trust in God. They expressed Joy over the deliverance of God. They praised God for his goodness and they even extolled the joy of forgiveness. The Psalm we focus on here celebrates God's goodness. The praise is not limited to words. The Israelites expressed joy with their whole being. They praised God with singing, dancing, and rejoicing! And lest we limit these expressions of joy to the ancient Israelites, Paul exhorts believers to overflow with joy in like fashion. *"Be filled with the Spirit... sing psalms and hymns... giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ"* (Ephesians 5:18-19).

As we celebrate Christmas this year and reflect upon the nature of Joy during Advent, it is my humble prayer that we recognize the goodness of God throughout the year and in our lives and let the Spirit fill us to overflowing so that we have no way of containing it. When this happens, let the world know. Sing praises, dance, and celebrate. The joy that God provides is eternal; and we don't have to wait until the end of the year to experience it!

"I am God—yes, I Am. I haven't changed." Malachi 3:6
In a universe constantly moving toward increasing disorder and chaos, the simplicity of this verse brims with significance. When my mind stirs with questions and my heart is troubled, I can always find peace and comfort in the unchanging nature of His character. He is ageless God—the Great I Am—*gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin (Exodus 34:6-7).*

God's tenderness as a loving Father is most profound to me during the Advent season. In 2007, my husband Ron, our daughter Rylie, and I were expecting a baby boy shortly after the holiday season. The holidays were celebrated with new fervor as gratitude and love flooded our hearts.

That little one was delivered via emergency C-section on the morning of Dec. 16, seven weeks before his due date. The darling five-pound, 13-ounce baby boy was doing well initially, but began having difficulty breathing. Doctors rushed around us, hurriedly explaining they needed to transport our child to a neo-natal intensive care unit in Charlotte.

"You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you." (Isaiah 26:3) As they transported Brayden away from us—the people who loved him most on earth—I felt an unexplainable peace. God would guard him, protect him, comfort him and keep him. In my weakness, the never-changing strength of *I Am* was perfect.

Brayden stayed in the NICU until Jan. 2. That Christmas was one of the most blessed—and most difficult—as we celebrated the incredible blessing of Brayden's life. Yet, we felt fractured, incomplete, afraid and exhausted. We stayed at the hospital as much as possible, but leaving Brayden to spend Christmas Eve at home with our little girl was heart wrenching. On Christmas morning, the Holy Spirit led me to Mark 5:36, where Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue, had been told that his daughter had died. *"Ignoring what they said, Jesus told the synagogue ruler, 'Do not be afraid; only believe.'"*

Never before had the Lord called us to so boldly trust Him. In hindsight, He was preparing us for a season of trust that was still to come as Ron's third open-heart surgery coincided with the unexpected news that another baby was on his way. We now celebrate three birthdays in December: Holden's (Dec. 7), Brayden's (Dec. 16), and that of our Lord and Savior Jesus—the *I Am* incarnate—on Christmas Day.

Fear and doubt will always challenge what the Lord is doing in our deepest valleys. Yet, our Savior's *command then is just as applicable now. "Do not be afraid, only believe."* Surrendering to Christ in trust is always accompanied by perfect peace.

As Zechariah proclaims, Jesus is—among many other things—our peace speaker. He was born *"to guide our feet into the path of peace."* My prayer this holiday is that we willingly go wherever He leads, trusting Him more deeply and enjoying the perfect peace of our unchanging God.



**SUNDAY,
DECEMBER 22**

Niki Bliss-Carroll
Public Relations
Specialist/Staff Writer

Malachi 3:1-7
Luke 1:68-79



MONDAY,
DECEMBER 23

Terry P. Floyd
School of Divinity
Alumnus

Psalm 126
Philippians 1:3-11

Christmas always brings back memories. When I was a young boy, everything about Christmas seemed pure. I did not recognize the hustle of the season because I saw Christmas through a child's eyes. I am sure mother's perception of Christmas was very different. My fondest memory was the Christmas lights. Mother would gather my two sisters and me into the car each weekend, and we would ride for hours in the dark admiring the beautiful colors, shapes, and sizes of the lights. Many lights blinked off and on while others were continually glowing.

This tradition was passed down through my family. I always looked forward to our annual event when I could load my children into the car and look at the beautiful lights. Now, my children take their children each year to see Christmas lights. Dorcas and I reflect and look with excitement for the next Christmas when our children and grandchildren come home for a meal to fellowship around the table and reflect on God's goodness.

The Israelites probably felt the same joy and excitement as they were "brought back" out of captivity. Psalms 126 tells us the Israelites "were like men who dreamed" and their "mouths were filled with laughter," and their "tongues with songs of joy." The Israelites had been a grief stricken people who longed for the day when God would free them from captivity. Now, they were free, and their hearts' desire had become a reality. They were grateful to God for all He had done for them. There must have been nothing that hindered the Israelites' praise to God for His grace and mercy.

I must confess that I do not always stop to thank God for all He has done for me. Yet, there are times when I am reminded of His grace and mercy as He has brought my family through many unpleasant situations in our lives. I do not have to reflect long to know that I am blessed.

I am a chaplain with Hospice of Cleveland County, and I see individuals who are experiencing very challenging times. Often they talk about God's goodness and mercy. One person recently said, "I am so tired, and I cannot wait to see what I have read about all of my life."

The Apostle Paul reminds us that "all of you share in God's grace with me" (Philippians 1:3-11). During this time of Advent, let us rejoice with thanksgiving. We are a community who has the opportunity, even when the "stuff" in life hits us, to allow God's grace to embrace us and be men and women who dream again and laugh until we cry.

It is time to look and reflect upon the light. Jesus said, "I am the light of the world . . ." (John 8:12). I anticipate joy in The Light this season.

As far back as I can remember most of my Christmas Eves were filled with anticipation, excitement, joy, and happiness. Even in the lean years of my childhood, somehow my parents managed to amaze my two brothers, sister, and me with something special that we had not expected. And we have tried to do the same through the years for our two sons as well. Christmas, after all, is supposed to be a fun and happy time—or so we had been taught long before anyone in my family became a Christian and learned the real meaning of Christmas.

Then the unexpected happened! While it does not compare to Isaiah's prophecy, it rocked our world just the same. Did you hear Isaiah? *"Wail,"* he proclaimed, *"for the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty...Pangs and agony...I will punish the world for its evil...make the heavens tremble...in the day of his fierce anger"* (Is. 13:6-13).

We were in seminary at the time, and living like most seminarians live, at or below the poverty level. But there was a "light at the end of the tunnel." The dissertation that I was writing was on schedule for completion. Our first son had just been born. Then suddenly, one Friday evening, Cindy turned to me and said: "I think I'm having a heart attack!" Her face was ashen and she collapsed to the floor hardly able to catch her breath. And for the next 13 days (from December 11-24) she was in the hospital. That meant that we spent Christmas Eve in the hospital, more than 500 miles away from home and family, and we missed our child's first Christmas!

To be sure, it wasn't the Almighty who was striking us down and punishing us with His anger. But it is the Almighty's anger at the evil in the world (including sickness and disease) that one day will culminate in evil's final destruction. Of course, it will take a major shake-up like that which Isaiah declared for the elimination of all of the world's corruption. The good news is that that very thing began to happen when Jesus was born. His birth set into motion the end to the trouble and treachery and sickness and disease that we all have had to deal with our entire lives. All it takes is a diagnosis of something incurable, the untimely death of someone, the outbreak of another war, or the onslaught of another local or global tragedy, and we all find ourselves welcoming the prophet's message.

Most interesting, isn't it, how the prophesied destruction can be good news for some people and bad news for others! If we happen to be living the "good life" in the moment, we might prefer that God delay His arrival. If, however, life isn't so good at the moment, we tend to be much more welcoming of the news that a change is on the way.

And since God directed Isaiah to declare it, we can be very sure that it will happen! Meanwhile, we keep the faith in God the Almighty (the only God that there is) and we spread the news—both the good and the bad—that sometimes we celebrate on Christmas Eve and sometimes we wail.



**TUESDAY,
DECEMBER 24**

**Robert W. Canoy
Dean, School of Divinity
Professor of Christian
Theology**

**Isaiah 13:6-13
John 3:22-30**



WEDNESDAY,
DECEMBER 25

Frank Bonner
President

Psalm 25:1-10
Luke 1:39-45

In *Twelfth Night* Shakespeare wrote that some have “greatness thrust upon them.” Sometimes circumstances can seem to “thrust” humility upon us. Several years ago Flossie and I were in New York for the Christmas holidays. We had resolved to visit a particular upscale hotel (very upscale!) during one of our walks around the city—not to stay there (we certainly could not afford it) but just out of curiosity to look in. That particular day it was raining and very cold. We were dressed in some old rain gear and, of course, soaking wet—rather shabby looking. I tried to beg off, but Flossie—typical for her—insisted we carry out the plan. And just looking in was not enough. Nothing would suit but for us to eat in the extremely posh restaurant in the hotel. It was apparent to everyone that we certainly were not guests at the hotel. Never before had I felt so out of place—and yes, so humbled.

But humility thrust upon us is no virtue. Genuine humility, however, is a common thread in the two scripture passages today and clearly comes across as a key virtue in the story of Jesus’ birth. It goes hand in hand with acceptance of God’s will and his plan. Mary responds to the angel, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” In the “Magnificat” she continues, “for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.” And further, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.” And Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, asks, “Why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?” Psalm 25 suggests that humility is a prerequisite of a sort for proper instruction by the Lord: “He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.”

The foundation of humility as an intentional virtue is the example of Jesus: “*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross*” (Philippians 2: 5-8).

Humility is one of the character traits that endear Pope Francis to so many. So why is humility such an important virtue? Perhaps it is because its antithesis is arrogance, conceit, and self-centeredness, while humility shares kinship with love, grace, forgiveness, and kindness. C.S. Lewis expressed it beautifully—“Humility isn’t thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less.”

Humility, even the circumstantial kind, does seem to engender kindness. After we admitted to the hostess at the posh hotel that no we did not have a reservation, she smiled and said, “Just act as though you have been waiting a long time,” as she escorted us to very nice seats.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

[illegible]

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper appears to be from a notebook or a standard sheet of stationery.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

ADVENT REFLECTIONS

This image shows a single page of blank, lined notebook paper. The paper is white and features approximately 20 horizontal blue lines spaced evenly apart. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the page.

PRAYER REQUESTS

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This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines, typical of notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Gardner-Webb University At-a-Glance

- Gardner-Webb is a private, Baptist-related university located in the Piedmont region of North Carolina.
- We serve nearly 5,000 students from over 37 states and 21 countries.
- The U.S. News and World Report also ranked Gardner-Webb as one of the “Best Universities” in the South that offer “a full range of undergraduate and master’s programs” in the 2012 edition of “America’s Best Colleges.”
- Gardner-Webb was one of only 528 universities and colleges nationwide to be named to the President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll (for the fifth consecutive year).
- Gardner-Webb was recently awarded the North American Mission Board’s (NAMB) Courts Redford Award, which recognizes the nation’s top 10 universities for mobilizing student missionaries through NAMB.
- A total of 5 professional schools, 2 academic schools, and 11 academic departments offer nearly 60 undergraduate and graduate major fields of study.
- Our 140+ full-time faculty (13:1 student-to-faculty ratio) are teacher-scholars who help foster meaningful dialogue, critical analysis, and spiritual challenge within a diverse community of learning.
- Gardner-Webb University is an NCAA Division I institution and competes in the Big South Conference and the Coastal Collegiate Swimming Association.
- Gardner-Webb features active chapters of at least 10 national honor societies in such academic disciplines as Biology, Spanish, English, French, Psychology, Religious Studies and Theology, and Nursing.

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110 South Main Street | P.O. Box 997 | Boiling Springs, NC 28017
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Located in Boiling Springs, N.C., Gardner-Webb University’s purpose is to advance the Kingdom of God through Christian higher education by preparing graduates for professional and personal success, instilling in them a deep commitment to service and leadership, and equipping them for well-rounded lives of lasting impact, Pro Deo et Humanitate (For God and Humanity).

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